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Chiara Olivastri

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# Con[temporary]. Design for social innovation

Chiara Olivastrì<sup>a\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup>DAD Department of Architecture and Design, Polytechnic School, University of Genoa

\*Corresponding author email: olivastrichiara@gmail.com, chiara.olivastri@arch.unige.it

**Abstract:** The theme of the paper fits within the framework of the dismissed urban heritage, seen as an interesting reservoir of social innovation, where we can observe the actions of auto organizations within resilient society using spontaneous and shared approaches.

The paper describes the encounter of abandoned areas in cities, creative communities and co-design as an interesting mix to rethink the logic of urban strategies strictly connected with the citizens.

In these terms the temporary use of urban voids are seen as the affirmation of ephemeral and open source over authorial and permanent logic for an immediate re-appropriation and new identity of voids.

The inquiry of processes within the Italian context draws the attention to the complexity of processes and activists involved in the reuse of urban voids in order to recognize the weaknesses and potentialities of an in-progress phenomenon and to find workspace for design.

**Keywords:** temporary uses, co-design, social innovation, vacant spaces

## 1. Context

Design is a discipline based on the creation of innovation and the anticipation of the future: in this sense “design for next” is design.

Inquiring into the role of design in the age of sharing means focusing on the set of theories and practices that put the attention on the participatory process. In fact, design for social innovation is not a new discipline, but a new field of application for activities connected to design that go beyond traditional boundaries, to meet the challenges of everyday life.

The paper deals with social innovation as a main driver for the implementation of the temporary use of abandoned spaces in cities. The spasmodic research of ‘the new’ seems to leave space for efficiency in what already exists and occurs, as innovation and growth stimulus. This phenomenon has not been consolidated yet, but is constantly increasing, and includes a wide coverage of different interventions and an interesting network of activists, some related to design and the art sectors and others from fields such as economics, politics and law.

The citizens and associations are the real initiators of this phenomenon, being the first ones who want to reuse that spaces, which are victims of structural decay due to the passage of time, that creates fear and detachment in habitants who live in these places.

Recycle means rethinking our relationship with memory, in order to forget, for the survival of present culture (Corbellini, 2013).

Working for the future requires reconsidering urban strategy strictly connected to the city-users, in order to undertake collaborative processes able to start immediately and rethink design in terms of flexibility and involvement.

The voids can be thought of urban reserves for the experimentation of collective dreams, free to allow and consolidate social capital and become spaces where the tactics of self-organizations in post-capitalist cities can be seen (Inti, 2014).

The undertaken actions are very different, ranging from performances, expositions, events, co-working and meetings for associations, which can awaken the attention on the spaces and activate social workshops. The concept is not only to occupy the space, but to trigger relationships and social networks, stimulate new schemes and new situations of urban movement within the city (Ratti, 2014).

In the last decade, especially in northern countries, design has become able to create innovation in services and the public sector and therefore acts for the common good, because of its capacity to interpret the contemporary complexity as a systemic activity rather than reduce variability, in order to reconfigure it as a prefiguration of new solutions. In fact common goods are all those goods that if impoverished can impoverish everyone and if enriched can enrich the society (Arena, 2007).

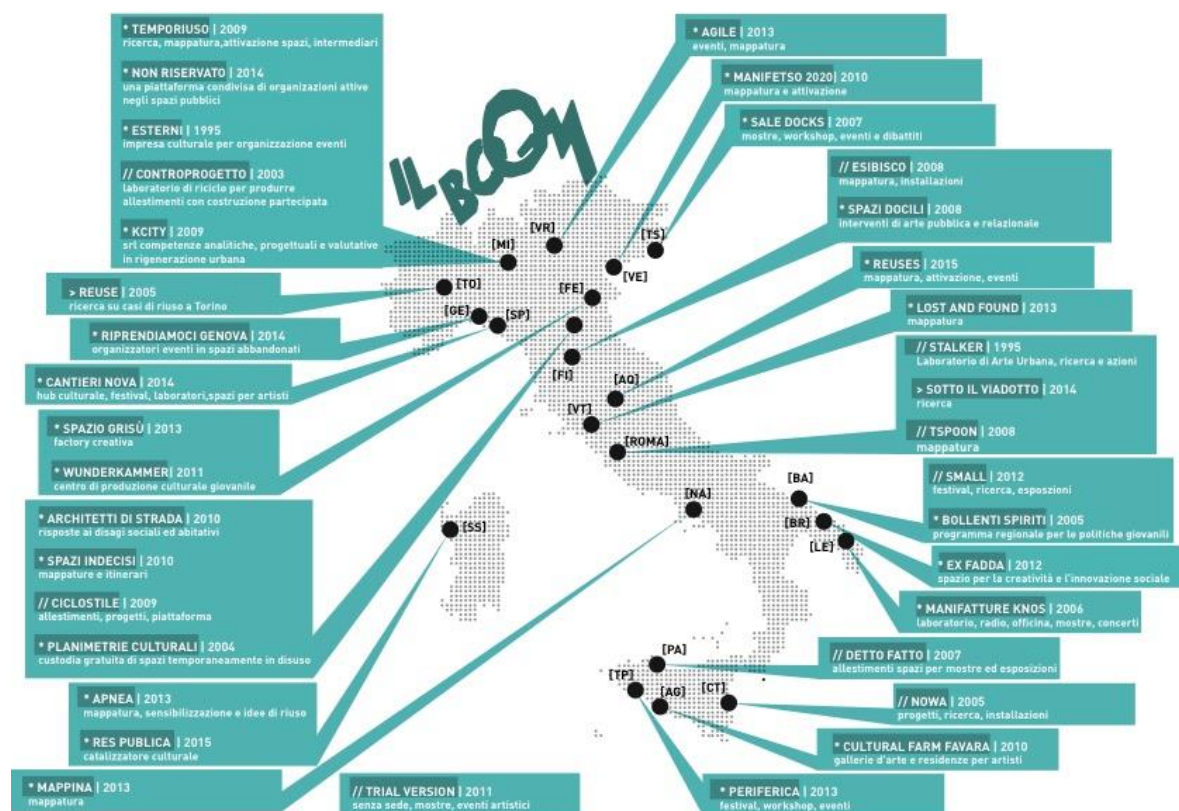


Figure 1. The main activists in Italy

After the crisis it's important to keep in mind that strategic discontinuity is needed to restart in the best way and formulate new thoughts, which are able to break free from obsolete and conservative logic (Campagnoli, 2014).

All new ideas that challenge traditional ways of doing things and introduce different and more sustainable behaviour, have an unprecedented capacity to bring individual interests into line with social and environmental ones (Manzini, 2015).

The exponential growth of this phenomenon of temporary uses can be explained as a symptom of society which sees in change an opportunity to show new features and needs that represent it in a world where lack of certainties don't mean less opportunities. In fact, the recent report in the book *Riusiamo l'Italia* (Let's reuse Italy) (2014) shows an increased demand for spaces for new functions concerning self-entrepreneurship and self-employment, for example cultural and social start-ups, co-working, social hubs, fablab, business incubators and accelerators.

In Italy during 2012 a rise of 0.5% of the people employed in creative and cultural sectors has been registered and an increase of 3.3% of entrepreneurship in 2013 which is 15.3% of national added value (Merlo, 2013).

The creative city has become a contemporary icon from which is drawn visions and anticipations.

All of these new attitudes are conducted in a collaborative way, like a return to the tribes and a reaction of liquefaction, for the transformation of the role of citizens into co-producers of services as a result of civic intelligence: Anna Meroni speaks about community-centred design (2008).

It is described as social economy characterized by the intensive use of distributed networks to sustain and manage relationships, sustained by broadband, mobile and other means of communication: an emphasis on collaboration and on repeated interactions, values and missions play a decisive role.

## 2. Methods of Inquiry

The temporary use for an immediate re-appropriation of urban voids is the affirmation of ephemeral logic through collaborative practices, in order to change the perception of those spaces.

### 2.1 Survey

These bottom up processes are investigated by a survey on Italian activists distributed online, aim to clarify relational dynamics among different subjects, in order to recognise weaknesses and potentialities of an in-progress phenomenon able to take off and to produce social change.

The objects of analysis are material and immaterial required artefacts, and consequently an interpretation of the role and tools of design in the city.

The majority of the heterogeneous professional figures involved are artists but there are also other members such as lawyers, sociologists, specialist workers and technicians for the realization of concrete projects.

The temporary teams are formed of a minimum of 5 to a maximum of 10 participants and present multidisciplinary characteristics due to the complex issues. There is a development of collaborative economy driven by the creative cooperation, cogeneration of opportunities and the sharing of information and tools.

Some groups of activists don't have an established workplace, for example Trial Version explain that they are in constant movement, belong to everywhere and nowhere and build their main relationships through the network, looking at a virtual space which borders seem to expand continuously (<http://trialversionproject.com>).

They are a group of artists and editors who describe their project, which started in 2011, as a mobile container within the city able to find and reactive underused spaces in order to reuse them in temporary expositions and to make them available for young artists.

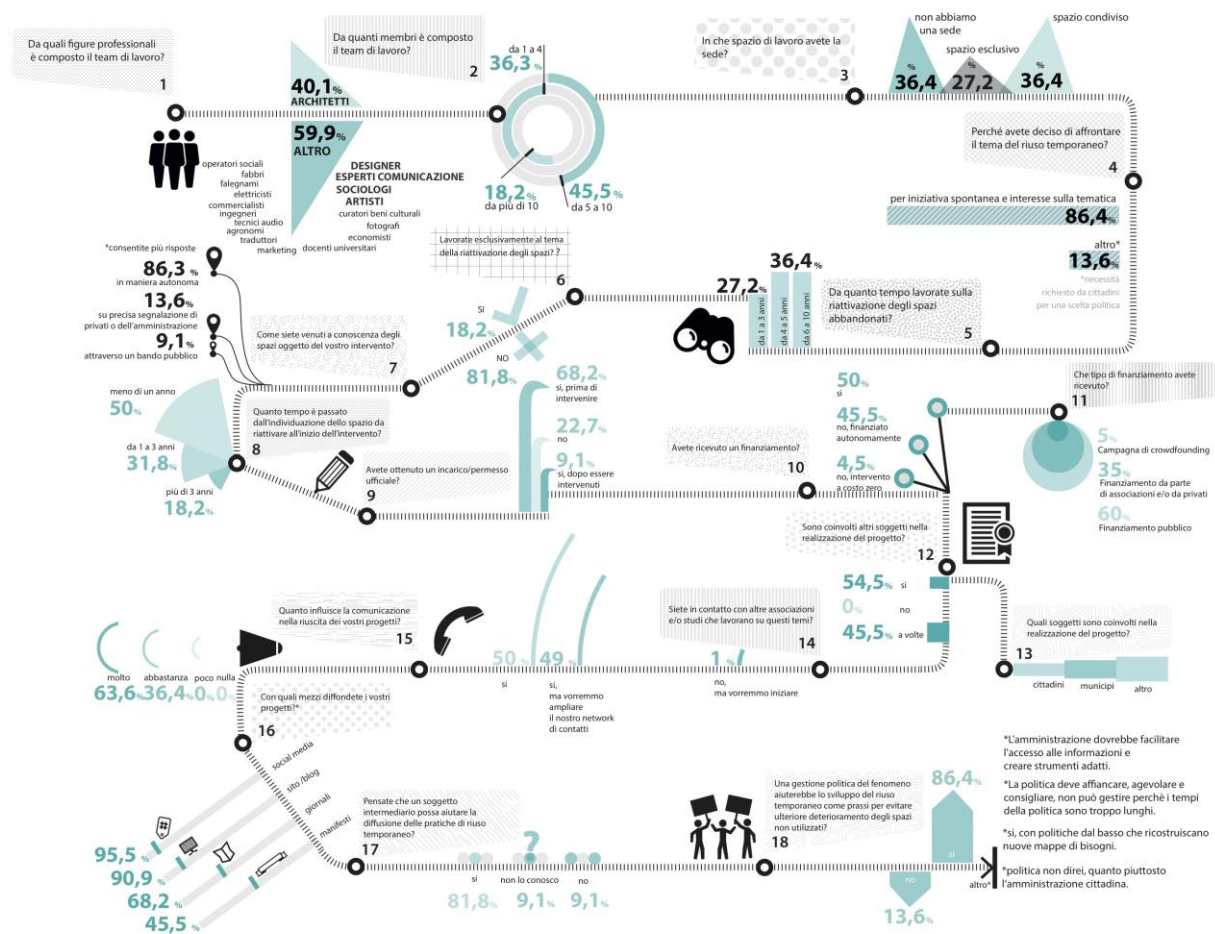


Figure 2. Questions and answers of online survey.

The main reasons for activists to react are personal interests and spontaneous initiatives. New competitive factors in the creative city are: culture, the ability to activate innovative and identity resources, communication as a strategic tool and cooperation for stimulating the community in a joint responsibility process (Carta, 2007).

The city has to go back to generate values starting from territorial, social and relational capitals, reactivating the relationship between creativity and the capitalism of manufacturing.

50% of self-financed and financed projects, mainly by public entities and a small part by crowd founding, private investors or sponsors have been registered.

When there are no economic resources, the involvement of external entities grows, contributing to the success of the project and helping in different ways from manpower to the supply of materials and spontaneous helping.

Although at the beginning the shortage of resources can be seen as an obstacle in respect to feasibility of many ideas, the strengths of this model are clear today. Waiting for funds prolongs the time needed for bureaucracy and permits the activists to start even without resources. In fact, the timely action is the major common characteristic of temporary use. In the questionnaire it has been



noted that half of interventions start in less than a year with just a minimum percentage taking more than three years. Because of the rapidity, only 68.2 % of the projects obtain authorisations or official assignments and the remaining actions are subsequently regularised only in part, whereas the others are illegal or tacitly agreed upon.

## 2.2 Mapping

The spaces became part of the research produced by the activists themselves, in fact, the voids are autonomously funded and only few vacant spaces are assigned by the public administration or allocated by public announcement. For many activists the research of underused spaces has produced a spontaneous need for drawing a map of abandoned areas even on a local scale and without specific instruments.

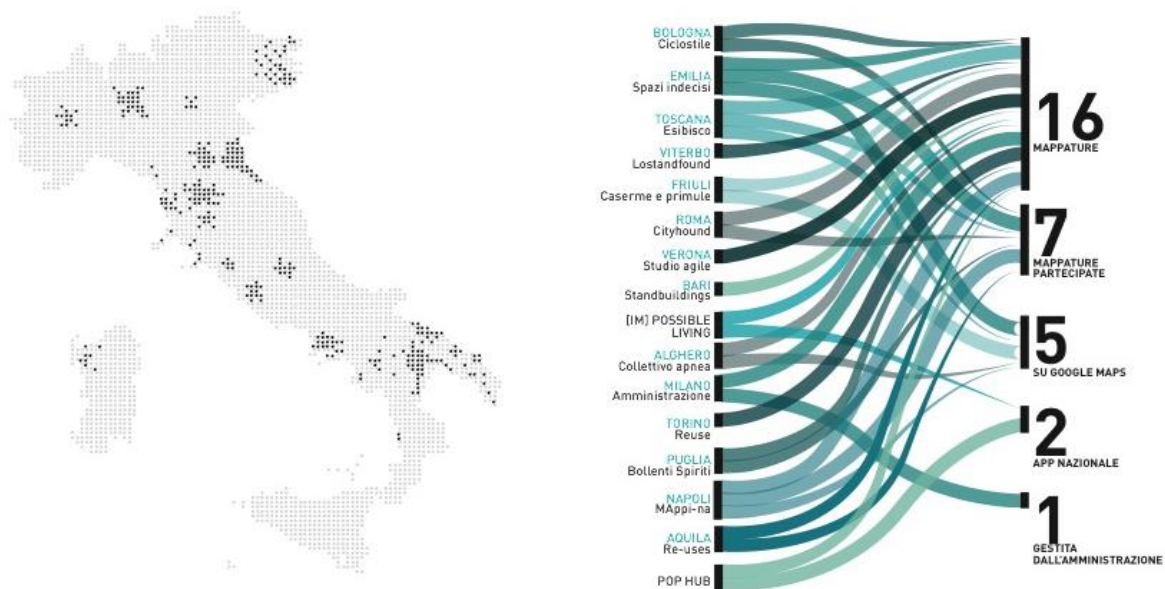


Figure 3. Localization of different typologies of maps on Italian territory

Now there are 16 local maps, 2 of them, Impossible Living e Pop Hub regarding national territory.

Pop Hub is a winning research project of the “Smart Cities and Social Innovation” which refers to PON “Research and Competitiveness” 2007-2013, financed by MIUR, (Ministry of Instruction, University and Research ) regarding Call for Ideas “Public spaces | networks | social innovation” within the Biennale of Public Space (edition 2013).

The mission of Pop Hub is to show a dismissed heritage with the aim of denouncing the abandoned situations in order to wake up the sleeping voids through new ways of re-appropriation.

The maps require the notifications of voids by citizens or anyone interested in recycle of spaces.

Only one is managed by public administration of Milan, activated since 2011, which has registered over 300 spaces that have to be recovered, 12 of which have been assigned for temporary reuses and 75 have been confiscated from the mafia (available at <http://bit.ly/mappa-MilanoSpazioComune>).

It should be noted that 86.4% of the activists want the involvement of the Municipality and would like to be supported by the local administrative authorities in order to promote the bottom up processes.

The role of an intermediary between the administration and the activists is considered to be extremely positive, either within the public sector or by an external agency although this doesn't exist in Italy.

This role can be taken by design experts, because of their capabilities to promote a dialogue between different stakeholders and in order to spread and promote different ways of recycling spaces. Awareness through widespread communication is considered part of the success of these projects.

The extension of design on the public and social sphere starts from the attitude of design to deal with systemic issues through design thinking, service design and strategic design to outline the way of participatory design.

Thanks to the network, it's possible to connect different spaces and activists involved in the same practices, extend the range of action and allow a comparison of experiences and shared knowledge.

In this kind of project we speak about glocal approach, underlining the presence in the local physical reality but also within the global space community.

Promoters and participants tend to search for the balance between local and the external: for a cosmopolitan localism (Manzini, 2015). Places are no longer isolated entities, but rather nodes in both short and long distance networks, where the short networkers generate and regenerate the local socio-economic fabric and the long ones connect a particular community to the rest of world.

## 2.3 Process

The relevant element of this kind of approaches is the evolution process of conception, development and realization of temporary uses.

The process is one of the most interesting feature in the field of design; it reveals the capacity of self-organisation and highlights the weaknesses and strengths which can be worked on to improve the phenomenon and understand how the reactions and the sequential actions of activists due to social, geographical and administrative-bureaucratic conditions evolve.

This aspect explains why the final projects gain relative importance, which are only temporary solutions, compared with the invariances and representative elements of the process.

In accordance with Schön (1983), who sustained that it is not correct to focus only on the analysis of the problem, but on the framework and the context, describing the idea of 'problem setting' as a component that holds the whole process together.

To Schön, design is not a problem solving activity in the sense that problem solving is generally considered as handling problems as given, whereas the process of problem setting defines the decision to be made, the ends to be achieved, and the means that may be chosen.

This is the reason why rather than dividing and classifying temporary projects in functions, typologies of spaces and activities, it seems to be more efficient to clarify typological clusters of activation.

Using the method of interviews with the same questions for each activist, three different *iter* with direct repercussions on the project choices have been identified.

The first one is defined as BOTTOM, because it entails doing something as soon as possible, regardless of the availability of the administration, financial resources and licenses. These are all

spontaneous initiatives distinguished by constructive claims, where operating prevails over the inefficiency of bureaucracy.

The second is called BETWEEN because the promoters try to overcome local difficulties in order to win and obtain funds and recognition from public announcements.

The last one is named BEYOND because of the will to include public entities to change the policy of urban heritage reuse and to activate recycle projects with the full collaboration of the administration. Sometime Municipalities became promoters to adopt integrated policies to respond to citizen needs and change the way of living in cities.



Figure 4. Sale Docks | BOTTOM, Periferica | BETWEEN, Wunderkammer | BEYOND

The description of different case studies can explain better previously clusters. The different dynamics between them and the administration recognize the weaknesses and potentialities of an in-progress phenomenon.

The main issue that have emerged from the survey is the new role of design not only as a mediator between the institutions and people, but also as an enabler thanks to its capacity to develop tools, material and immaterial artefacts, in order to support and stimulate cooperation between different subjects, which affect this continuously-growing phenomenon.

An example of the first cluster is Sale Docks in Venice, concerning a group of young artists who have occupied a part of publicly owned docks to denounce the potentiality of forgotten spaces. They have organised exhibitions and debates and have renovated the location with recycled materials from dismantled installations from the “Biennale”, on agreement with the owner.

Periferica is a cluster case study BETWEEN; a festival and workshop that involves citizens and local associations and was organized by a group of students of the university of architecture in a disused quarry.



In the first year it was totally self-financed by the activists due to the indifference shown by the Mayor and public entities. Then later, thanks to winning a public announcement for financing the reuse of spaces it was possible to work on the permanence and growth of the project.

For the last cluster BEYOND, the Municipality of Ferrara restored an abandoned building, using public funds, then announced a social innovation project which was assigned to Wunderkammer, who organised the space into co-working zones, social meetings and public activities.

## 3. Conclusions

What are the fields in which design can make a contribution?

### 3.1 Policy

The results of the inquiry reveal that the kind of process has repercussions on the time and duration of the interventions. Frequently, bottom actions don't have enough resources to continue if needs be. In fact, when there is the will to proceed and affect, it's important to find a compromise with public entities and secondly obtain public resources. In order to do this, there is an urgent need to work on re-thinking the practices of public policy in order to allow for social complexity, uncertainty and unpredictability in the planning of public outcomes. To overcome these limitations, Sabine Junginger (2015) suggest to rethink or reframe of policymaking as problem-setting design approach.

The Design expert is an enabler and facilitator for creating new integrations and suggests different ways for policymaking to be done. Good policy develops behaviours, fosters resilience and can produce enzymes of transformation.

The most exciting development is the exploration of different ways of creating innovation within the policy process itself (Bunt and Christiansen 2012).

In Italy a specific regulation doesn't exist for the temporary use of abandoned spaces.

This legal gap is the main deterrent to the development of the process and to full recognition by public entities.

Different institutions such as University, Legambiente, ANCE, WWF, Italia Nostra, FAI, Libera, CNAPPC have been asking for a new national program for the regeneration of 70% of real estate assets, which corresponds to 8 million buildings, excluding 13,000 properties that were confiscated from the mafia.

The first solutions are the decree law n. 133 of 12 September 2014 named 'let's unlock Italy' which deals with urgent measures for the realization of public works, digitalisation of the nation, simplification of bureaucracy and the art.24 includes measures of benefits for community participation dealing with the protection and valorisation of the territory.

The first Regulation written by the City of Bologna in 2014 is the first official step that recognize the bottom up initiatives of citizens for care and regeneration of urban commons.

However there are still many legislative issues. It is interesting to frame normative matters from a wider perspective to understand how policy concerns and affects the society and therefore also design.

The issue has been debated intensely in Design for Policy (2014) the first publication that describes the value of the collaborative approach in design for the social innovation in public policies.

Policies are windows into political processes in which actors, agents, concepts, and technologies interact in different sites, creating or consolidating new rationalities of governance and regimes of knowledge or power (Shore and Wright, 2011).

The use of design for and in policymaking has its roots explicitly in the development of service design, especially service design in social situations. There is a need to reimagine policymaking as designing through inquiry, experimentation and learning to overcome these limitations (Junginger, 2015). The first change is to shift the focus from being problem-centred to being human-centred: to considering the actual human experience as a starting point. In fact, the policymakers, who think of themselves as problem-solvers, find answers only for those problems they become aware of, too often the wrong ones.

The creation of innovative policies depends on the ability to inquire into situations before they turn into problems, in order to transform contents and actions into motivations for change. Questions and inquiries, as used in design, are essential for this approach. The aim is to arrive at policies that are meaningful, useful and usable to people and society.

For public organizations, human centred design is mandate, not an option, only by changing this paradigm can the policymakers reframe issues from a top down approach on a human scale.

Design skills can help the policymakers arrive at more citizen-centric policies and services.

## 3.2 Materials

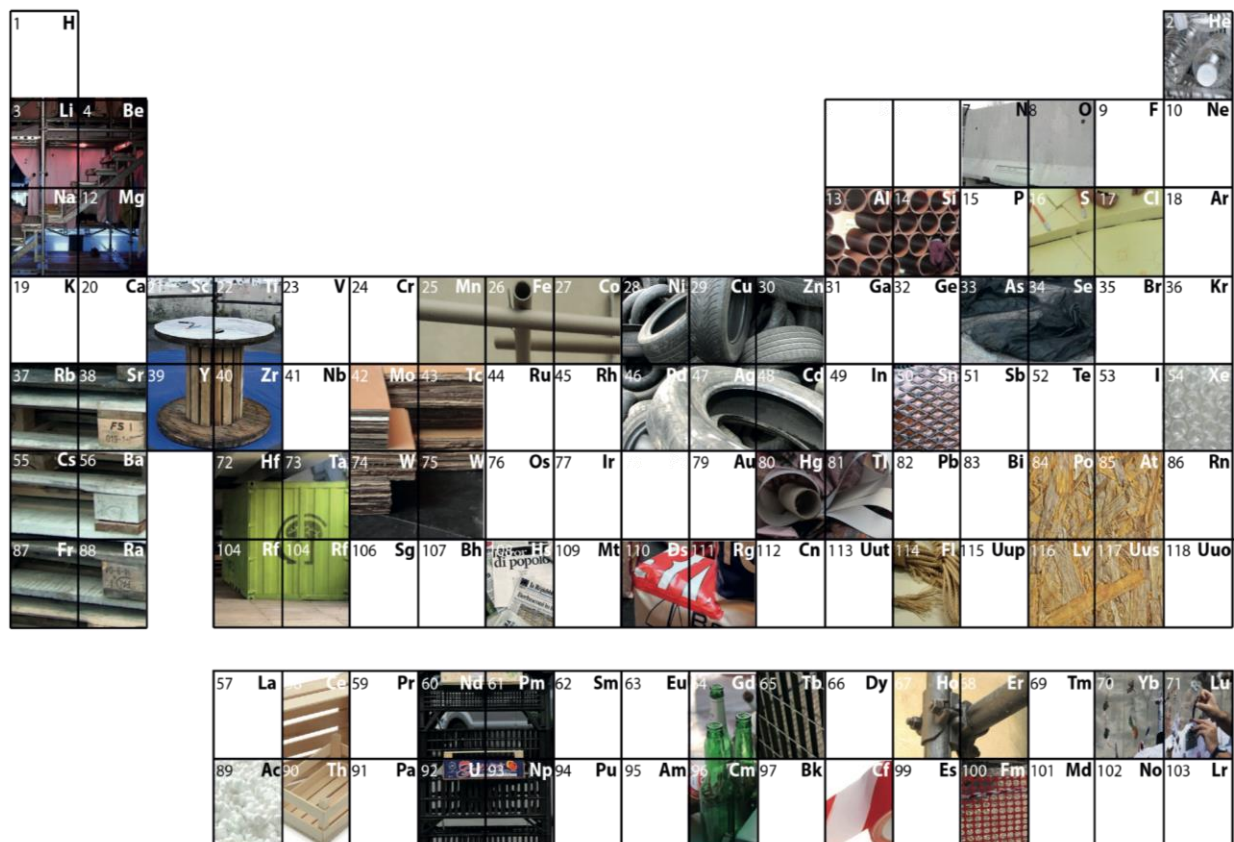


Figure 5. Materials lexicon of recycle

The language is composed of lexicon, words and expression that can give form to different meanings, notions and actions, irrespective of how they have been put together.

Observing temporary use from the perspective of design means deciphering codes at different semantic levels to form cooperative elements, which complete the transmission of the overall message. In particular, the observation of materials is part of the lexicon; they become a language and therefore a sign of recognition with particular connotations.

The main materials used are often recycled or easily available at low cost, regardless of the economic resources of the projects and clusters, because it is a distinctive and characteristic sign of the wider philosophy of recycling. The repertoire of materials is very large and extendible: the most popular are easy to find objects like pallets, tyres and plastic crates.

Nowadays the term recycling has become such a central issue that its value can be switched from ethic to aesthetic without mediation (D'annunziiis, 2013). What is politically correct as a product of reuse makes sense and so is also considered beautiful. The risk is disregarding the project and shifting the intervention into an amateur product made by a good bricoleur.

The challenge is to do aesthetic research on both new material choices and innovative uses of classic materials in order to achieve ethic values. Imperfection has become a value and aesthetic attribute, but it has to be contained in order to avoid being seen as synonymous of superficiality and negligence and makes the project appear not temporary but improvised.

All these materials create a sort of periodic table, from which it is possible to obtain new chemical reactions in order to create attractive recycled spaces.

The lexicon of recycling has become an interesting field of design research, where it is possible to explore the use of new materials or where creating new components from waste to respond to specific needs or particular installations.

### 3.3 Social innovation

The open book in social innovation written by Robin Murray, Julie Caulier Grice, Geoff Mulgan (2011) is about the many ways in which people are giving new and more effective answers to the biggest challenges of our times. The main interest in innovations is that they are both social in their means and aims. Social innovations are defined as new ideas (products, services and models) that simultaneously meet social needs and create new social relationships or collaborations. In other words, they are innovations that are both good for society and enhance society's capacity to act.

In this sense, temporary uses are considered actions for social innovations and can be seen as concrete steps toward sustainability: local application of an idea of well being based on a new idea of relationships between people, and between people and their environment.

If temporary use works on social innovation, it's important to clarify the role of design experts.

Designers can be facilitators and provokers: the tools they use do not serve only to make ideas co-created by the group more visible and more assessable (visualising) but also stimulate the group by feeding the discussion with original visions and proposals (visioning).

Public innovation means to understand sociality, foster emerging skills, put at the centre design for services, manage hybridity and changes (Lanfrey, 2016).

This is also a shift from designing 'for' the community, to designing 'with' the community and finally to allow communities to design 'by themselves' (Brown 2009) and it opens up the issue of planning an 'exit strategy' by creating the condition for the innovators to be autonomous and committed enough to take the initiatives further.

In doing this, the designer becomes part of the team or community attempting to undertake the challenge. Here conventional professional advice is replaced by a situation where the designer is 'embedded' in the community. This allows speaking about design and community coaching: using professional tools to make things happen and enables people to do it (Fuad-Luke, 2009; Fry 2011).

Contemporary designers are required to concentrate on relations between design and society and the power of design to transform our environment and society rather than a pursuit for form and function.

Design for social innovation is everything that expert design can do to activate, sustain, and orient processes of social change toward sustainability (Manzini, p.62).

The role of design expert is a blend of creativity, dialogic cooperation, special kind of openness, able to be at the same time critical, creative and dialogic, to transform their design culture into visions and proposals. Thomas Markussen, asking himself what the impact of design activism is in the daily life of citizens, answered that design is not a boycott, strike, protest, demonstration or some other political act; instead, it gains its power of resistance by being precisely a "designerly" (2013) way of intervening in people's lives. This is a subject matter for design research.

To educate designers for this era, from trans disciplinary Design, to Design and Urban Ecologies, exploring the complex forces that influence urban growth and development, means to provide opportunities for self-directed learning, cross-disciplinary collaboration, and exposure to academic areas beyond the traditional boundaries of art and design (Allen, 2013).

They spark off new initiatives, feed social conversations, and help the process of convergence toward commonly recognized visions and outcomes. In short, they make things happen. Finally the task of design is to decrypt the complicated matrix behind each process working on weaknesses and channelling isolated and sporadic actions towards social and cultural change.

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About the Author:

**Chiara Olivastri** is adjunct professor in Design in Genoa. Her research activities regards design for social innovation and design for policy in order to recognize new bottom up dynamics for the reactivation of urban spaces and services design as an answer of sharing economy.

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